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THOMAS F. MATHEWS

The Emperor and the Icon

Abstract

The emperor has been credited with many things, why not icons? Modern art historians have enthusiastically subscribed to a theory crediting the emperor with a major role in the development of icons, brushing aside all evidence to the contrary, whether archaeological or literary. But early sources on the Christian icon consistently parallel it not with emperor cult, but with the private icon cult observable among the pagans, and a large body of Late Antique pagan icons (at least 30) has survived into the twentieth century with close similarities to early Byzantine icons.

The Kamoulianai Icon(s) of Christ

In an ecclesiastical history referring to the years 554-561 a miraculous icon of Christ was carried about Pontus and Cappadocia to raise money for re-building a church. The painting, referred to as an *acheiropoietos*, that is, painted by no human hand, has vanished; nevertheless it has assumed an extraordinary importance in the art historical discussion of icon origins. Ernst Kitzinger and André Grabar, followed by Hans Belting, Paul Magdalino, Judson Emerich, Leslie Brubaker and others have all used the story to document a decisive imperial intervention in the development of icon cult.[1]

To summarize Kitzinger's widely accepted theory of icon development, we are asked to regard the first three centuries as a void for icon study, due to the Church's rejection of images as idolatrous. In the fourth and fifth centuries the growing popularity of relics paved the way for a more material approach to worship, and Christian acceptance of the cult of the emperor's official painted portrait, the *lauraton*, suggested the transfer of such a cult to Christ and his saints. Finally in the sixth century the enthusiastic embrace of icons in imperial circles determined their general acceptance. It is at this juncture that the Kamulianai icon(s) of Christ are invoked. The evidence bears re-examination.

There are a number of sources concerning the icon(s). An eighth century legend, in a sermon of pseudo-Gregory of Nyssa, places the miraculous origin of the Kamoulianai icon in the time of Diocletian (286-305).[2] In this account, when the wife of the pagan toparch of Kamoulianai, one Bassa-Aquilina, prayed secretly for baptism, she was instructed to prepare a vessel of water and a white cloth on a white table. Christ rewarded her holy desire by appearing in her room in a glo-

1. Kitzinger 1954; Grabar 1957; Belting 1994, 53-57, 106; Magdalino 1993, 15-16; Emerick 1998, 356-358; Brubaker 1998. Dobschütz' study of a century ago is the basis for these discussions of the Kamoulianai icon, but the imperial interpretation is modern; Dobschütz' purpose was rather to place the Christian icon phenomenon in the context of miraculous images of ancient Greece. Dobschütz 1899, 40-60.
2. Dobschütz 1899, 41-45.

rious vision accompanied by the Seraphim. Thereupon he washed his face and dried his face with a towel, leaving his image on it. Aquilina kept the icon in secret, venerating it with a burning lamp in a private chamber, which she walled up before her death. Bishop Gregory, the purported author of the account, claims to have discovered the image with the lamp still burning in the time of Theodosius, and he removed it to Caesarea.

A fifth or sixth century account of the icon in Zacharias of Mitylene gives a more complicated story, ending with the famous procession.[3] In this version a catechumen named Hypatia complained to her Christian mentor, "How can I worship Him, when He is not visible and I do not know Him?" Going later to the fountain in her garden she discovered an image of Christ miraculously fixed upon a linen cloth; the cloth remained dry though submerged in water. Full of surprise, she wrapped the cloth in her veil to bring it secretly to her mentor and another miracle occurred: a second copy of the image was imprinted on Hypatia's veil. Hypatia built a chapel for the first image in Kamoulianai, and the copy was taken to Caesarea. Another devout woman subsequently brought still a third copy of the icon to her own village of Diyabudin in the province of Pontus, where she made a church for it.

Zachariah follows the story down to the time of the Persians who destroyed the church of Diyabudin in 554-555; at this point the clergy there appealed to Justinian to replace the church, but his minister suggested instead that the icon be paraded about in procession to raise funds, which they did in a ceremony repeated (annually?) for six years.

In Ernst Kitzinger's history of icon origins this is a critical turning point. In the Kamoulianai processions, Kitzinger argues, "an image of Christ is described as receiving the same kind of public display which was traditional in the cult of the imperial image."[4] Further he describes this icon use as "an infringement of a domain of ritual hitherto reserved to them [the emperors]."[5] Belting endorses this position: "Previously, the ceremonial procession of an image had been reserved for the effigy of the emperor, which served to represent him in the provinces. These rites were now for the first time usurped by a religious image."[6] The cult of the Christian icon, he continues, was copied from that of the imperial icon. "As early as the sixth century we hear of a state cult of the icon at Kamuliana clearly based on the worship of the imperial image. At that time the icons of Christ and the emperor were even worshipped side by side, with more or less the same rituals."[7]

But this is wishful thinking. The legend describes the procession as a priestly matter. Justinian's part in it was negative: he refused to contribute to the reconstruction of the church and left it to the local clergy, who found the popularity of the icon could generate all the funds they needed. Processions of religious images,

3. Dobschütz 1899, 40-43; the text is translated in Mango, 1972, 114-115.
4. Kitzinger 1954, 100.
5. Kitzinger 1954, 124. In a footnote Kitzinger alleges that a garbled passage in the Syriac text of Zachariah actually refers to the procession as a "lauraton", but he fails to offer a translation of the line in question. Kitzinger 1954, 125, n. 180a. Magdalino's translation of the line makes no sense. Magdalino 1993, 15.
6. Belting 1994, 53.
7. Belting 1994, 106.

as M.P. Nilsson notes, were enormously popular throughout the ancient world, apart from any emperor's participation.[8] For example, in Greek religious festivals an image procession might be employed to link two cult places, as when the statue of Iacchus was carried from Eleusis to Athens and back. On other occasions one god might be brought to visit another, as when Artemis' statue was carried from Mesoa to Patras. This is precisely the kind of ceremony illustrated in a Pompeian fresco from Via dell'Abbondanza. The statue of an enthroned Kybele flanked by lions is shown visiting an archaic Dionysos in a little aediculum.[9] Four porters in special garb, with staffs of office, have just put down the *ferculum*, or palette with which they carry their sacred burden. They are preceded by white clad priests making offerings; an altar and candelabra accompany the rite. The ceremony bears a striking resemblance to the procession of the Hodegetria icon in Constantinople as known from representations and texts. In a pair of studies Nancy P. Sevcenko has demonstrated how the carrying of the icons of the Mother of God was assigned to a brotherhood in special garb, who would heft it on a similar palette, accompanied by clergy with incense and choir.[10]

The subsequent history of the Kamoulianai icon takes us to Constantinople where the icon was brought in 574 according to historian Kedrenos.[11] This transference is often attributed to Justin II, but Kedrenos does not mention the emperor in this respect. He simply says the icon "came" to Constantinople, almost as if it migrated under its own power. Imperial explanations underrate the force of popular religion.

Once in Constantinople, the Kamoulianai icon is further identified in the modern view with an achieropoietos of Christ used as a kind of palladium of Constantinople, carried to battle against the Persians first by the generals Philippikos (586) and Priskos (588) and then by Herakleios (622). But the sources call the icon acheiropoietos without naming Kamoulianai and, as Alexander Kazhdan points out, another icon, from Melitene, is also a enters the picture.[12] The latter's history is told in the Menologion reading of the 11th of August.[13] The origin of this miraculous icon of Christ is not related, but an ailing widow, a *patrikia* named Maria, asked the priests in charge of the image to let her borrow it for forty days. Draping it with a cotton fabric, she put it in a clean box, lighting candles before it for forty days. At the end of that time a miraculous fire fell on the icon, consuming nothing, but curing Maria. The story refers these events to the time of the emperor Tiberius (578-582). Maria left the icon to a bishop Domitian to bring to a cloister of nuns in Melitene in Cappadocia, and fleeing the Persian invasion under Herkleios (610-641) the nuns took their icon to Constantinople.

Whichever of these achieropoietoi became the "palladium" of Constantinople, this use of an icon marks a new status for icon cult. That it marks a transfer of specifically imperial cult to icons is less clear. We lack parallel instances of the emperor's portrait carried into battle. Under the Principate imperial images were

8. Nilsson 1970, 880.
9. Regio ix, 7, 1-2, officina infectoria: *Pompei, Pitture e Mosaici* 9, 768-773; Vermaseren 1978, 17-19.
10. Sevcenko 1995.
11. Bekker 1838-1839, 1, 685.
12. DeBoor 1887, 73; Kazhdan 1991.
13. Dobschütz 1899, 47-50.

for a time attached to military standards, as can be seen on the Column of Trajan (little metal discs, it appears, rather than painted panels). But the practice is not documented in Late Antiquity. Moreover, in his account of Herakleius' use of the icon of Christ, George of Pisidia expressly distinguishes the icon, which the emperor took in his hands when addressing his troops, from the military standards, which the soldiers lowered out of respect when their commander began speaking.[14] When the generals bring icons into to the defense of the empire they are adopting an age-old religious rite. In this connection Belting himself, following Dobschutz' lead, cites a series of religious images which protected their cities in time of battle, going back to the prime analogate of palladia, namely Troy's image of Pallas Athena.[15] Such usage was a traditional religious image rite independent of imperial involvement. In any case, it should be pointed out that the seventh century is rather late to be searching for an imperial impetus to the rise of icons, given the sizeable body of surviving sixth century icons.

The insistence on finding an imperial script for the history of icons requires that we bypass the important evidence that locates all these miraculous images of Christ in the private sphere where they were the possession of women.[16] We are asked to expunge Aquilina, Hypatia, the woman of Diyabutin, and Maria of Mytilene from the record as if of no interest. To the modern mind an icon capable of stopping armies in their tracks must not be credited to women; but the Byzantines thought otherwise. The fact that the legends commonly gave women the lead role in early icon cult can only mean that the public of that day found such a version of events both plausible and appealing. The women mentioned seem to be women of quality. Aquilina was the wife of the toparch and Maria of Mytilene had the honorific title of *patrikia*: they therefore belonged to a social elite. Hypatia was doing the traditional woman's chore of fetching water for her family, but the fact that the well/fountain was in her own garden means that her family owned property. The mention of towels, linens and veils reinforces the domestic, female context of the stories. The weaving of fabrics was women's work, and in Constantinople fabrics were the most potent relics of the Mother of God. The legends' associations of the "birth" of Christ's image from a watery source further suggest a metaphor of childbirth. Thus the Kamoulianai myths speak eloquently and unequivocally of a female and domestic origin for the most powerful icon(s) of Christ. The icon(s) then pass through the ecclesiastical sphere in the care of bishops, churches, nunneries and priestly processions before finally the emperor, in moments of public crisis, appeals to the icon(s) for help. But even in battle it must have the clergy's duty to carry the icon, as we see in representations of icons carried to war.[17]

The Earliest Witnesses to Christian Icons

The three earliest witnesses to Christian icon cult confirm the impression of a female, domestic origin, and significantly they are all bypassed in Grabar,

14. Pertusi 1960, lines 186-187.
15. Belting 1994, 55-57.
16. Herrin 1982 must be credited with opening the question of the part women played in icon cult.
17. Alpatov 1975, plate 17.

Kitzinger and Belting. Irenaeus in the second century is the earliest witness of Christian icon use. Under Pope Anicetus (ca. 154-166) a woman named Marcellina, leader of a Christian sect called Harpocratians, venerated icons of Christ on which she hung wreaths and "observed other rites that are just like those of the pagans."[18] The fact that in the second century the home was the place of Christian worship suggests the context of this icon use. What this source adds that our later sources omit is the parallel with pagan cult.

The earliest detailed description of the Christian veneration of icons also alludes to the pagan roots of the practice. The *Acts of John* composed in the third century has been strangely neglected, though it contains an interesting sketch of what one can only call a theology of icons.[19] According to the narrative, one of St. John the Evangelist's first disciples in Ephesus was the praetor of the city, one Lykomedes. Won over by the saint's cure of his wife, who had been paralyzed by an enemy's "evil eye", Lykomedes wanted to somehow capture the saint's miraculous power. Accordingly, he secretly had an icon made which he kept in his bedroom, wreathing it with garlands and lighting candles before it. Evidently he felt that the staring eyes of the saint's icon would be an effective protection for his wife and himself against further assaults of the evil eye. The magical powers of the gaze is important in the *Acts of John*; Christ, it narrates, was different from ordinary men in that he never closed his eyes.

The apostle's reaction to Lycomedes' icon veneration is extremely interesting theologically, for while he rebuked him as "childish and imperfect", he tried to find positive values in his icon. First he verified the likeness in the icon, calling for a mirror. The verification of similitude was later to become a common topos in the literature on icons: one cannot use an icon unless one is guaranteed that it is authentic.[20] In the second place, the apostle made the icon into an allegory of the interior image that the Christian should cultivate. "Do you be a good painter for me, Lycomedes. You have colors which he gives you through me, that is Jesus, who paints us all (from life) for himself, who knows the shapes and forms and figures and dispositions and types of our souls. And these are the colors which I tell you to paint with: faith in God, knowledge, reverence, kindness... and the whole band of colors which portray your soul... When a full set and mixture of such colors has come together into your soul it will present it to our Lord Jesus Christ undismayed and unworn and rounded in form." The icon is only a dead example of the image which the Christian should develop in his soul.

In the second and third centuries, then, some Christians were already using icons in the private sphere, and the practice was understood to be parallel to a contemporary pagan icon usage. The same situation is attested by the Eusebius in the fourth century. Grabar, Kitzinger, and Belting are satisfied with citing Eusebius as spokesperson for the church's opposition to icons in his response to

18. Unger & Dillon 1972, 90 = Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*, 1, 25, 6.
19. Hennecke & Schneemelcher 1964, vol. 2, 188-259. This document has recently received attention from Sande 1993, who places the origin of Christian icons in ancient portraiture.
20. For examples, see Maguire 1996, 5-47.

a request for an icon of Christ by Constantia, sister of Constantine the Great.[21] "These are excluded from churches all over the world", the bishop affirmed. But Eusebius' prohibition did not include the private sphere, for quite inconsistently he goes on to tell Constantia that when a woman brought him an icon of Paul and Christ clad as philosophers, he did not destroy the work but confiscated it and kept it in his own house to prevent its improper use by the woman. "I took it away from her and kept it in my house, as I thought it improper that such things ever be exhibited to others, lest we appear, like idol worshippers, to carry our God around in an image." Thus, while he was firm in his objection to icons in church, in private among reliable persons he could permit them; the problem lay in the appearance of pagan practice. In his *Ecclesiastical History* he again associates the existence of Christian icons with pagan practice.[22] "I have examined images of his apostles Paul and Peter, and indeed of Christ himself, preserved in color paintings; which is understandable since the ancients used to honor saviors freely in this way following their pagan custom." *Soter*, savior, is a common epithet of the gods used especially of Zeus. Eusebius was well aware of a pagan icon cult, and the Christian use of icons seemed all too similar.

Witnesses to Pagan Icon Cult

The earliest texts concerning Christian icon cult, therefore, situate it in a domestic, usually female, sphere. At the same time they seem to point to a distinctively non-imperial inspiration for the cult, namely the parallel, contemporary pagan cult of panel paintings. Because cult images in Antiquity were most often statuary, the very existence of a class of objects that one might call pagan icons is generally overlooked. But the literary sources are undisputable.

Pliny refers frequently to panels, *tabulae* in Latin, showing individual gods in non-narrative settings. Whether found in temples or in private homes, some of these pagan icons were associated with religious and miraculous phenomena, such as a Parrhasius' painting of Herakles done from a vision, or another Herakles of his which was three times struck with lightning without suffering damage.[23] The individual compositions are not described, but those that involved enthroned figures must have presented the figures frontally in typical icon fashion, such as Zeuxis' *Enthroned Zeus among the Gods*, Nikomachus' *Kybele on a Lion Throne*, or Asclepiodorus' *Nemea Enthroned on Lions*.[24] Pliny even describes the staring gaze of one icon by the painter Famulus, the painter of Nero's *Domus Aurea*. "By his hand there was a Minerva which continued to face the viewer no matter from what angle he looked at it."[25]

The continued pagan cult of sacred panels in Late Antiquity is documented in the Christian sources we have mentioned of the second to fourth centuries, but the evidence does not break off here. Literary sources trace the existence of such pagan "icons" down as far as the eighth century. Malalas testifies that when Justinian put pagans in Constantinople under house arrest in 561, "their books

21. *PG* 20, 1545; see translation in Mango 1972, 16-18.
22. *PG* 20, 680; see translation in Mango 1972, 16.
23. *HN* 35, 69, and 71.
24. *HN* 35, 63, 109, and 131.
25. "Huius erat Minerva spectantem spectans, quacumque aspiceretur." *HN* 35, 120.

were burnt... together with pictures (*eikones*) and statues of their loathsome gods."[26] The sixth century rise in Christian icon production might well have been due as much to the burning of pagan icons as to the emperor's sponsorship of Christian icons. We know that the confusion of Christian images of Christ with pagan images of Zeus had been a cause of real scandal under the Patriarch Gennadius (458-471).[27] Burning the images of Zeus was one way of circumventing this problem, and the elimination of competition would also have created a new market for Christian icons.

It is remarkable that the currency of pagan icons in the eighth century is entirely overlooked in the scholarship dealing with iconoclasm. John of Damascus, writing in the Judaean desert under the caliph, may have seen more open pagan rites than one would have in Constantinople. But it was the iconoclasts of Constantinople who made the pagan parallel of Christian cult an issue; as John notes in his *De Haeresibus*, they had accused the orthodox of worshipping images "as if these were gods, as the pagans do."[28] John of Damascus tried to sort out the confusion. "If you speak of pagan abuses", he writes, "these abuses do not make our veneration of images loathsome. Blame the pagans, who make images (*eikones*) into gods! Just because the pagans use them in a foul way, that is no reason to object to our pious practice. Sorcerers and magicians pronounce exorcisms just as the church does over catechumens, but they are invoking demons while the church invokes God against the demons. The pagans set up images (*eikones*) to demons and address them as gods. But we set up images to the true God made man and to the servants and friends of God, who expel the hosts of demons."[29]

Yet it is significant that the only distinction the theologian can make between the two kinds of images is a theological distinction between true and false gods. The manner of veneration and the kinds of imagery must have been very close. Perhaps the difficulty of distinguishing Christian from pagan icon on the basis of iconography alone explains the orthodox insistence after Iconoclasm on having the names of the saints inscribed on their icons.

In another place John of Damascus seems to be speaking of church policy when he says: "If anyone should dare to make an image for the glory, veneration and cult of the devil, or of the demons, we spit on it and consign it to the flames."[30] As in the age of Justinian, the surge in icon production following iconoclasm may be attributed in some measure to the destruction of competing pagan icons.

The Corpus of Late Antique Panel Paintings

The accepted imperial version of the origin of Christian icons not only omits embarrassing literary sources, it also skips a conspicuous body of archaeological evidence. The story is made to start with the well-known body of early Byzantine

26. Jeffreys, 1986, 300.
27. See Theodore the Lector as quoted in Mango 1972, 40-41.
28. *PG* 94, 774. See also Gero 1973, 109.
29. *PG* 94, 1256-1257. Cf. Anderson 1980, 32, where the translator has mistaken the present tense for a past tense.
30. *PG* 94, 1293.

icons of the sixth and seventh centuries. Some uncertainties of dating make it difficult to fix their exact number, but the core is the group of icons at St. Catherine's, Mount Sinai, published by George and Maria Soteriou[31] and by Kurt Weitzmann,[32] to which must be added two or three from Rome,[33] and a dozen from the Nile valley, sometimes put in a subgroup called Coptic.[34] This amounts to a total of less than fifty paintings.

But an earlier body of panel paintings has been passed over in silence. The Late Antique votive panels of the ancient pagan gods are similar to icons in size and in number: thirty have been counted to date, of which six were lost in World War II. They generally present their subjects frontally, in non-narrative poses, often with haloes. Like icons too, they are generally without exact provenance, but with one exception they are from Egypt, generally the Fayum. Many now belong to collections in Europe and the United States. No discussion of the whole group has been attempted, and scholars working on Byzantine icons have studiously avoided looking at any of the material.

This bias in scholarship obviously reflects the preconceptions of the scholars involved. When Kitzinger and Grabar worked on the origins of icons in the late fifties, eighteen Late Antique panels had already been published by scholars as distinguished as Franz Cumont and Michael Rostovtzeff, in prominent journals like *Archäologischer Anzeiger* and *Aegyptus*. The omission of such evidence on the part of Grabar and Kitzinger is corollary to their preoccupation with imperial connections. In the period between the Wars scholars like Ernst Kantorowicz, Andreas Alföldi, Hans Peter L'Orange, and Grabar himself had been copiously documenting the many aspects of imperial rulership, ceremonial, portraiture and iconography.[35] Grabar's *L'Iconoclasme* is an extension of his *L'empereur dans l'art byzantin*.[36] Kitzinger, the younger scholar, caught the spirit of this enterprise during his tenure at Dumbarton Oaks in the '40s. Christian icons had to fit the pattern, and evidence to the contrary was simply discarded.

To correct this imbalance a study has been undertaken by this author in collaboration with conservator Norman Muller of the Princeton University Art Museum. We propose to assemble and study the corpus of "Late Antique Panel Paintings", examining as far as possible all physical aspects of the paintings, as well as their iconographic and cultural context. Since they are the best surviving representatives of the great Classical tradition of panel painting they are the first step in the whole European tradition of panel painting. Fayum mummy portraits, it should be observed, are not panel paintings strictly speaking; generally they were executed on boards almost paper-thin without frames, and they had no separate existence outside of the mummies in which they were wrapped.

Our present list includes thirty panels, a number that will certainly grow with further research. Though it is too early to make any conclusions, some connections with early Christian icons already present themselves for our investigation. These can be divided into aspects dealing with construction and aspects dealing

31. Soteriou 1956 and 1958.
32. Weitzmann 1976.
33. Amato 1988.
34. Rassart-Debergh 1990.
35. Mathews 1999, 3-22.
36. Grabar 1936.

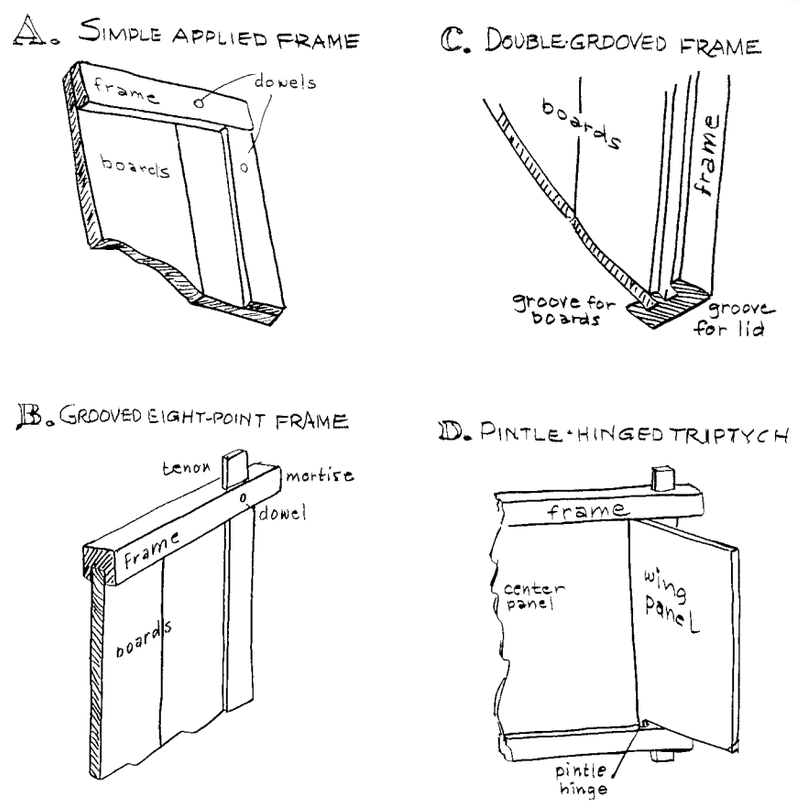

Fig. 1 – Details of Construction: A, Simple Applied Frame; B, Grooved Eight-point Frame; C, Double-grooved Frame; D, Pintle-hinged Triptych.

with composition and iconography. [In the following discussion the pagan panels are referred to by their numbers in our Checklist; the Christian icons of Sinai by their catalogue numbers in Weitzmann 1976.]

A. Construction

In contrast to the encaustic of many early Byzantine icons, the medium of the Late Antique panels is generally tempera. In construction, however, there are many similarities. Four different constructions can be distinguished.

1. The simplest panel construction consists of vertical boards held together by a frame that is attached to the surface with dowels (Fig. 1, A). This construction is exhibited on a panel formerly in the Ashmolean (Checklist no. 25; Fig. 2). One section of frame remained intact along the right side. A number of Sinai icons were constructed in the same fashion. For example, on icon B6 though the frame pieces themselves have disappeared the reserved border and the dowel holes show how the frame was applied. On B12 three sides of the frame remain, meeting at the corners in mitered angles.

FIG. 2 – Soldier-god with Club. Oxford, Ashmolean Museum, no. 1922.237 (lost) = checklist no. 25 (photo: Courtesy of the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford).
FIG. 3 – Isis, Suchos, and Harpocrates Enthroned. Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Ägyptisches Museum, no. 159978 (lost) = checklist no. 8 (photo: *Archäologische Anzeiger* 1905).

2. Four panels (Checklist nos. 1, 8, 13, and 30; FIGS. 3, 5) exhibit a more complex eight-point frame still marvelously intact (FIG. 1, B). The thin vertical boards of the painting fit into a groove in the frame pieces, which in turn are interlocked with mortise and tenon joints at the corners. The ends of the framing pieces extend beyond the corners. The framing elements themselves are missing on the Sinai examples, but in studying B1, B3, B5, and B11 Weitzmann observed that the unpainted edges are too narrow to accommodate any other frame than an eight-point grooved frame, which he refers to as a "grooved frame which extended considerably beyond the limits of the icons."[37]

3. One of these icons (Checklist no. 8) exhibits a variant on this construction, namely a double grooved frame, the second groove destined for a sliding lid to cover the painting (FIG. 1, C). Weitzmann observed the same feature on three of the Sinai icons, B10, B15, and B31. Weitzmann interpreted the sliding lid as a practical protection for carrying the icons about;[38] but our panel, measuring 62.5, was too large to be easily portable and the lid may have been intended instead as a device for concealing and revealing the subject. This would link it to another device for concealing and revealing, namely the triptych, which is our fourth kind of construction.

4. Six of our panels are wings of triptychs provided with pintles to fit into the frames of now missing central panels (Checklist nos. 4, 5, 10, 11, 21, and 22; FIG. 4). Unfortunately the central panels are missing, and the Getty Museum's pairing

37. Weitzmann 1976, 33.

38. Weitzmann 1976, 31.

FIG. 4 – Military God. Berkeley, Phoebe Hearst Museum of Anthropology, no. 6.21384 = checklist no. 4 (photo: the Phoebe Hearst Museum of Anthropology).

of its two wing panels of Isis and Serapis (nos. 21 and 22) with a male portrait is mistaken. As Ehlich's study of representations of Roman triptychs has demonstrated, the wings of the panel had to be shorter than the central panel in order to fit into its frame.[39] In the Getty example they are longer. Approximately a third of the early icons of Sinai are pieces of triptychs that were assembled by the same pintle hinge construction. For example, Sinai's B17 and B23 are wings with pintles intact, while B14 is the center panel of a triptych. Our Late Antique examples thus represent the start of a long tradition of triptych construction stretching down to the Renaissance.

B. Composition and Iconography

Beyond these details of construction, many features of composition and iconography suggest connections to early Byzantine icons.

1. In composition the general stance of frontal figures in static, non-narrative poses is common to both traditions. Background is suppressed in preference for

39. Ehlich 1953, 83-90.

FIG. 5 – Heron. Providence, RI, Rhode Island School of Design Museum, no. 59030 (photo: Rhode Island School of Design Museum).

the figures, often full-length, who hold in their hands some identifying symbol of their power or status. Half of the Late Antique figures are haloed, as are most of the Christian figures. The halo fixes the viewer's gaze on the gaze of the painted figure. Most look directly at us, or slightly to one side.

2. The figures may be conveniently divided between the high gods of the pantheon, such as Isis, Serapis, and Harpocrates (FIG. 3), and lesser attendant gods mainly military. The high gods of the pagan panels are often seated on thrones (Checklist nos. 1, 2, 6, 8, 17, 26). Suchos enthroned occurs twice, Min once, and Isis, Egypt's great mother goddess, perhaps four times. One need hardly mention the importance of thrones to the iconography of the Mother of God.

3. Some fifty percent of the pagan panels depict military figures, sometimes by themselves, sometimes in attendance on the high gods (FIGS. 2, 4, 5). Heron can be identified, but most of them remain anonymous, including equestrian and camel gods. Whatever their identity, they bear a striking resemblance to Christian soldier and equestrian saints, such as Theodore and George, who also occur sometimes singly, sometimes in attendance on the Mother of God.

4. One might also parallel the situation of donors in the Late Antique panels with those in Christian icons. Four of our panels show human donors on a diminutive scale to one side or behind the divinity (Checklist nos. 7, 13, 19, and 30; FIG. 5). Inscriptions sometimes identify the donor and voice his prayer "for a benefit" (*ep' agatho*). Parallel inscriptions and small-scale donor figures occur in early Byzantine icons such as Sinai B14.

5. Significant too is the very peculiar "icon" phenomenon of the repetition of a canonical composition. Three of our panels repeat virtually the same composition of two haloed military gods standing side by side (Checklist nos. 9, 13, 19). One holds a pine bough entwined with a serpent that identifies him as Heron; the other has a double-edged axe. Evidently this composition had attained a sacredness that justified its being copied over and over, exactly as occurred later in Christian icon painting.

Conclusion

The two bodies of ancient panels – the Late Antique panels and the early Byzantine icons – share many features in construction, in composition, and in iconography, encouraging us to suppose some continuity between them. Moreover the earliest literary references to Christian icon cult connect it with a pagan cult of painted panels. Further, the sources generally locate the origins of Christian icon cult in a domestic setting, and of the six pagan panels with firm archaeological provenance four came from houses (Checklist nos. 8, 9, 15, 18, 24, 29).

In two notable respects, however, the Christian paintings break decisively from their pagan antecedents.

Three of the pagan panels are frankly erotic (Checklist nos. 1, 14, and 23). In the recently published panel in Alexandria the god Min holds his erection in his hand; the Harpocrates in Cairo assumes the pose of the infant Dionysus, spreading his legs to expose his sex; and in the Moscow panel Aphrodite exposes her breast as she draws her lover Ares under her mantle. Eroticism played no part whatever in early Christian icons.

Finally it should be noted that two of the pagan panels may be imperial (Checklist nos. 8 and 20). The well-known portrait of Septimius Severus and his family in Berlin seems by its small scale to belong to the domestic sphere rather than to official realm of *laurata*. In addition, the horseman in Hartford, who is supposed to represent Heron, seems to have a Caracalla cast to his face. Pagan cult readily admitted the emperors as benefactors of mankind. The body of early Christian icons, on the other hand, includes no emperor, not even the revered Constantine the Great.

CHECKLIST OF LATE ANTIQUE PANELS UNDER STUDY

1. Alexandria, Archaeological Museum, no. 22976; Suchos and Min. V. Rondot, "Min, Maître de Tebtynis", in W. Clarysse *et al.* (eds.), *Egyptian Religion, the Last Thousand Years*, Louvain 1998, 2, 241-255.

2. Ann Arbor, Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, no. 88613; Enthroned Figure. T. Mathews, catalogue entry in S. Walker & M. Bierbrier (eds.), *Ancient Faces: Mummy Portraits from Roman Egypt*, rev. edition, New York 2000, 127.

3. Ann Arbor, Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, no. 88723, Nemesis; T. Mathews *loc. cit.*, 126-127.

4. Berkeley, Phoebe Hearst Museum of Anthropology, no. 6.21384; Military God. FIG. 4. D. Thompson, "A Painted Triptych from Roman Egypt", *GettyMuseumJ* 6-7 (1978-79), 185-192.

5. Berkeley, Phoebe Hearst Museum of Anthropology, no. 6.21385; Military God. *Ibid.*

6. Berkeley, Phoebe Hearst Museum of Anthropology, no. 6.21386; Enthroned God. Unpublished.

7. Berkeley, Phoebe Hearst Museum of Anthropology, no. 6.21387; Priest and Donor (Sobek). Unpublished.

8. Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Ägyptisches Museum, no. 15978, Isis, Suchos, and Harpocrates Enthroned [lost]. FIG. 3. O. Rubensohn, "Aus Griechische-Römische Häusern des Fayum", *AA*, 20 (1905), 1-25.

9. Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Ägyptisches Museum, no. 15979; Heron and Companion. *Ibid.*

10, 11. Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Ägyptisches Museum, no. 17957 [lost], two triptych wings with divinities in two registers. R. Pagenstecher, "Klapptafelbild, Votivtriptychon und Flügelaltar", *AA*, 34 (1919), 9-25.

12. Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Antiquarium, no. 3129; Septimius Severus and Family. H. Heinen, "Herrscherkult im römischen Ägypten und Damnatio Memoriae Getas: Überlegungen zum Berliner Severtondo und zu Papyrus Oxyrhynchus XII 1449", *RM* 98 (1991), 263-298.

13. Brussels, Musées Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire, no. E-7409; Heron and Companion. F. Cumont, "Un dieu supposé Syrien, associé a Hérôn en Égypte", *Mélanges Syriens offerts á René Dussaud*, vol. 1, Paris 1939, 1-9.

14. Cairo, Egyptian Museum, no. J. 31568; Harpocrates, *op. cit* (no. 8).

15. Cairo, Egyptian Museum, no. JE. 87191; Equestrian God. É. Drioton, "Objets de culte domestique provenant de Médinet-Qoûta", *Annales du Service des Antiquités* 40 (1940-41), 923-935.

16. Cairo, Egyptian Museum; Bust of Goddess with Attendants. M. Rostovtzeff, "Kleinasiatische und Syrische Götter im Römischen Aegypten", *Aegyptus* 13. 1-2 (1933), 493-513.

17. Cairo, Egyptian Museum; Enthroned Goddess with Attendants, *ibid*.

18. Dakhleh Oasis, Egypt; Isis. C. Hope, "Excavations at Ismant el-Kharab in the Dakhleh Oasis", *Egyptian Archaeology* 5 (1994), 17-18.

19. Étampes, France, private collection; Heron and Companion. M. Rassart-Debergh, "Plaquettes peintes d'époque romaine", *Bulletin de la Société d'Archéologie Copte* 30 (1991), 43-47.

20. Hartford, CT, Wadsworth Atheneum, no. 1934.6; Mounted Equestrian God. D. Thompson, "The Hartford Horseman", *Chronique d'Égypte* 50, nos. 99-100 (1975), 321-325.

21. Malibu, CA, J. Paul Getty Museum, no. 74.AP.21; Serapis. D. Thompson, "A Painted Triptych from Roman Egypt", *GettyMusJ* 6-7 (1978-79), 185-192.

22. Malibu, CA, J. Paul Getty Museum, no. 74.AP.22; Isis. *Ibid*.

23. Moscow, Pushkin Museum, no. 4233/I Ia 5786; Ares and Aphrodite. K. Parlasca, *Mumienporträts und verwandte Denkmäler*, Wiesbaden 1996, 72-73.

24. New Haven, Yale University Art Gallery, no. 1936.127.28; Shield of Arsu. C. Hopkins, "The Painted Shields", in M. Rostovtzeff (ed.), *The Excavations at Dura-Europos, Preliminary Report of the Seventh and Eighth Seasons of Work*, New Haven 1939, 327-369.

25. Oxford, Ashmolean Museum, no. 1922.237 [lost]; Soldier-god with Club. FIG. 2. Rostovtzeff, *op. cit.* (no. 16).

26. Oxford, Ashmolean Museum, no. 1922.238 [lost]; Enthroned Isis with Attendants. *Ibid*.

27. Oxford, Ashmolean Museum, no. 1922.239 [lost]; Soldier-god with Spear. *Ibid*.

28. Paris, Louvre, no. P207; Equestrian God. Parlasca, *op. cit.* (no. 23), 60.

29. Paris, Louvre, no. AF 10878-AF 10879; the Tyche of Constantinople. M-H. Rutschowscaya in G. Andreu *et al.*, *L'Égypte ancienne au Louvre*, Paris 1997,147-148.

30. Providence, RI, Rhode Island School of Design Museum, no. 59.030; Pl. 4. Heron. G. Nachtergael, "Trois dédicaces au dieu Hérôn", *Chronique d'Égypte* 71 (1996), fasc. 141, 138-142.

Thomas F. Mathews
Institute of Fine Arts, New York University
1 East 78th Street
NY 10021-0178

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